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AUTHOR Rasinski, Timothy; Padak, Nancy
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ABSTRACT

Most instructional efforts in literacy education are aimed at helping learners acquire literacy skills and strategies that will enable them to deal with any text. Readers learn to read by reading, however, so it is important that readers have successful experiences with reading. Success can be fostered by careful selection of reading materials. Principles to consider in selecting texts for adult beginning readers include the readers' interests and backgrounds, the text language, contextual support, and text format. A variety of texts can be used in instructional settings, such as picture books; juvenile chapter books; poetry and songs; texts written by students themselves; Bibles, prayers, and other culturally relevant texts; newspapers and magazines; scripts; "how to do it texts"; personal communications such as journals; and captioned television and videotapes. A wide variety of materials can be used for literacy instruction. Making the texts readable and inviting for the students enhances their chances of successfully mastering reading. (KC)

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Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

Research to Practice

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Text Considerations in Literacy Teaching and Learning

Timothy Rasinski and Nancy Padak
Kent State University

Reading is often defined as meaning construction, an interaction that occurs between a reader and a text. This definition presupposes two major factors involved in all literacy experiences whether successful or not--the reader and the text. Most instructional efforts are aimed at helping learners acquire literacy skills and strategies that will enable them to successfully deal with any text.

However, another compelling description of the process of learning to read is that one learns to read by reading. If this is indeed the case, then instruction should be aimed at maximizing learners' successful, satisfying, and authentic reading experiences. Helping learners develop strategies for reading can maximize the amount of successful reading. So can careful selection of texts. Texts that are overly difficult (or perceived to be difficult) will either not be read or read unsuccessfully or with an unsatisfactory response. Such experiences will inevitably lead to less reading by the learner, which will result in less learning.

On the other hand, well chosen texts that are perceived by the reader as relatively easy to read and interesting will be read successfully and with satisfaction. The successful experience will likely lead to more reading experiences of the same type, which will lead to greater levels of competency that will enlarge the range of text difficulty and topics that the reader can handle successfully. Literacy researcher Keith Stanovich calls this phenomena the "Matthew Effect." Successful reading experiences lead to greater skills levels in reading, which lead to more reading. The rich get richer, while the poor (those who have unsuccessful reading experiences) get poorer.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss some key principles of text selection. We believe that these principles can help literacy educators choose reading texts that are at appropriate levels of difficulty and that readers perceive as interesting and within their range of ability.

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Reader's Interest and Background

Texts that tap into students' interests or for which readers already have some knowledge tend to be easier to read. Familiarity with the topic and vocabulary helps readers make sense of the text they encounter. Similarly, texts that match students' interests are likely to be more motivating, thus increasing the chance of a successful and satisfying reading experience.

Teachers can determine students' interests and backgrounds by surveying them. Brief questionnaires or surveys given at the beginning of a course can easily enlighten teachers about students' backgrounds and interests. Texts can then be found that tap into students' backgrounds.

Text Language

Text language can easily add to difficulty. Conceptual load refers to the difficulty of the words and concepts that are part of the text. Unfamiliar and difficult-to-decode words tend to make a text more difficult. Teachers should be sensitive to the words in a text by previewing the material before assigning it to students and asking to what extent students will be familiar with the concepts and words central to text understanding.

Teachers also need to consider language patterns in determining the appropriateness of a text. Many stories for children, poems, songs, and chants contain repeated sentences or phrases, rhythmic patterns, or rhyming schemes. These features tend to create patterns within the text that make it more predictable and hence, easier to read.

Stories, poems, and other texts can also follow a generalized pattern of development that readers may be familiar with. This macro-pattern (e.g., fairy tale pattern for a narrative; limerick pattern for a poem) will also add to the predictability of the text, more at the level of story elements than at the level of individual words or phrases.

Contextual Support

Texts may also contain other contextual features (features not necessarily part of the essential body of the text) that can also make a text more or less difficult for readers. These features include clearly stated headings that properly delineate appropriate levels of text for the reader; pictures, figures, and tabular information that support the content of the text; and prereading questions, overviews, or text organizers that allow the reader insight into the organization of the text. Electronic texts may also contain hypertext features (the ability to gain instant access to word definitions or other relevant information on related topics) that may make text more inviting for readers. When previewing text, teachers should not only be alert to the presence of these contextual supports, but also be able to judge the quality and appropriateness of the support features in aiding the reader's understanding.

Text Format

Still another consideration for choosing appropriate materials for readers are text format features. These refer to how the text is visually presented to the reader. Sheer length of text may be an important factor for many readers. Texts that are overly long may seem overwhelming to the struggling literacy learner. Other format features can also add to the perceived difficulty of text. Size of

font used in the text, print color, spacing between lines, and vertical and horizontal margin size are just some features that may cause a text to "look" more or less difficult. In addition, teachers should also look at the perceived clutter in text. Some texts contain an overly large number of tables, figures, footnotes, margin notes, and the like that may distract readers and draw their attention away from the main body of text.

Text language, contextual support elements, and text format features may add to or diminish readers' success and satisfaction with a text. When examining text for possible use in instructional or recreational reading activities, we suggest that teachers not only be aware of the existence of these features but also be able to judge the significance and quality of such features. Using a text examination checklist, such as the one found on the last page of this paper, is one relatively easy and informal method for doing such an examination. Different checklists can be developed to meet the particular needs of any given group of students.

Possible Texts

Finally, we identify a variety of texts that can be used in instructional settings and describe some of their positive (and negative) features.

Picture Books. Picture books are usually written in easy-to-read language, often containing some patterned elements. The pictures add a large amount of contextual support to the text, which is usually short in length. Text format is usually very inviting with large fonts, and plenty of space between lines and in margins. The major drawback to such texts is that they may be perceived to be childish by adults and older juveniles. One approach for overcoming this problem is to tie older students' use of such books with their presenting the books to children. Another approach is to rely on books recommended by the OLRC Reading Group.

Juvenile Chapter Books. Longer trade books may also work well with older students. Many trade books for children are extraordinarily well written and deal with topics that adults and older students will find interesting. However, because the main audience for such books is elementary and middle grade children, the conceptual load is usually markedly lower than for adult material of the same genre. Knowledge of award winning books (such as the Newbery Medal) and consultation with children's librarians can ensure selection of good materials.

Poetry and Songs. Poetry and songs have several characteristics that make them good choices for instruction. Poems and songs often have distinct and detectable rhyme and rhythm patterns that make the texts highly predictable. In addition, the melody of songs adds another layer of contextual support that increases the predictability and memorability of the texts. Poems and songs are normally shorter in length than narrative texts. Poems and songs for children are often equally suitable for older students, especially if students are learning them to share with younger children. Moreover, such poems have vocabulary and conceptual loads that are easily within the experiential range of most older students.

Texts Written by Students Themselves. The term literacy educators use for this type of text is *language experience* texts, since such texts are based on the experience and written in the language of the learners themselves. Language experience texts can either be

written directly by the students themselves or dictated to another person, usually a teacher or tutor, who writes the text in a clear and conventional format. The major advantage of language experience texts is that, because the texts reflect students' own experiences, they already have complete comprehension, conceptual control, and high interest in text content. Moreover, since the texts are written in the learners' own words, the language of the text is highly predictable to students.

The sense of authorship that accompanies the creation of language experience texts also adds to the learner's satisfaction with the activity. In addition, other learners often enjoy reading texts written by fellow students. This increases motivation and satisfaction for both the reader and the creator of the original text.

Bibles, Prayers, and Other Culturally-Relevant Texts. When texts reflect students' background and interests they are more easily read. Bibles, prayers, and other culturally-relevant material such as family or town histories may fit this bill. Such texts often reflect the deepest emotions of students. Thus, students will be familiar with such texts and have a deep personal desire to be able to read them successfully. When choosing materials of this type teachers need to be sensitive to students' cultural and religious sensitivities.

Popular Press Materials. Newspapers and magazines are usually written at relatively low levels of reading difficulty, thus easing the vocabulary and conceptual loads for most students. Such texts reflect current and popular events, events for which students likely have some background and interest. The variety inherent in the sections of newspapers and magazines insures something of interest to all readers. In addition, stories in newspapers and magazines are usually relatively brief and are often filled with plenty of contextual support in the form of graphs, figures, and illustrations. Due to the success of USA Today, more popular press publishers have also worked on developing text formats that are inviting to readers.

The "Drama in Real Life" story in each issue of Reader's Digest is an example of a popular press text that will work well with many developing readers. The brief stories, written in easily apprehensible language, deal with true and exciting events that will capture the interest of many readers.

Scripts. Many students enjoy performing for others, whether in a skit or play in which the script is memorized or in a readers theatre situation in which performers read the script without overt acting. Such texts promote expressive oral reading since students need to include the prosodic features of language (stress, pitch, volume) in their reading. Scripts are readily available in public libraries and can be purchased from companies that create scripts for reading instruction (e.g., Readers Theatre Script Service) at a variety of levels of difficulty.

Learners can also create and perform their own scripts based upon short stories (e.g., picture books) they have already read. Such an activity is an authentic writing task and will add to learners' sense of accomplishment.

How To Do It Texts. Texts such as "fix it" manuals, self-improvement books, driver manuals, medical information material, and recipe books may be highly motivating to some individuals because they reflect personal needs and interests. Teachers need

to assess students' needs and interests before choosing such texts.

Personal Communications. Letters and notes written between individuals can be highly motivating texts and reflect the interests and backgrounds of learners. Privacy issues may be a concern in using such materials, so teachers need to be receive explicit permission from learners before employing such texts in learning situations. Personal journals and diaries are excellent and authentic ways to encourage reading and writing that reflect personal interests and backgrounds. People enjoying reading and rereading past entries they have made in their own diaries.

Dialogue journals are essentially conversational journals kept between two people -- parent and child, teacher and student, husband and wife. Dialogue journals are wonderful ways to encourage reading and writing for students. Since students choose the topics, they have a natural interest and background in what is written by themselves and their partner.

Captioned Television and Videotapes. The government now requires that newly manufactured televisions include the ability to present written captions along with the visual and sound presentation. Television programs are highly motivating to many students and reflect current events or interests. Moreover, the oral and visual context supplied by television programs offers a high degree of support for developing readers. Research into the use of captioned television with developing readers has demonstrated that it holds great promise for improving readers' achievement.

Many commercially produced videotapes are also available. We think that captioned videotapes of children's songs are very promising. In addition to the oral and visual contextual support offered by the video, the rhythmic, rhyming and melodic features of the songs themselves make them highly predictable and memorable for readers.

As you can see, a wide variety of material can be used for literacy instruction. We have described only a small portion of the types available to informed literacy educators. As you choose materials for use by students, whether for instructional or recreational reading, be aware of characteristics that make a text readable and inviting for students. Make informed judgements about the suitability of texts for students based upon evaluation of those characteristics.

THE OHIO LITERACY RESOURCE CENTER IS LOCATED
AT KENT STATE UNIVERSITY
414 WHITE HALL, P.O. BOX 5190, KENT, OH 44242-0001
1-800-765-2897 OR 330-672-2007
EMAIL ADDRESS: OLRC@KENTVM.KENT.EDU

TEXT EXAMINATION CHECKLIST

	YES	NO
READERS		
High interest	❒	❒
Appropriate background	❒	❒
LANGUAGE		
Manageable conceptual load	❒	❒
Predictable language patterns	❒	❒
Predictable structure	❒	❒
CONTEXTUAL SUPPORT		
Headings	❒	❒
Graphics	❒	❒
TEXT FORMAT		
Manageable length	❒	❒
Appropriate font size	❒	❒
Appropriate spacing	❒	❒
Appropriate margins	❒	❒
No other visual distractions	❒	❒

NOTES: